DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 186 UD 033 815

AUTHOR	Nevarez, Nancy
TITLE	An Oasis in This Desert: Parents Talk about the New York City Beacons.
INSTITUTION	Academy for Educational Development, Inc., New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	15p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adults; *Community Centers; Elementary Secondary Education; Focus Groups; *School Community Relationship; *Urban Youth; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*New York (New York)

ABSTRACT

This report presents the findings of focus groups convened to determine what the parents of youth participants in the New York City Beacons think about the program. The Beacons initiative is a comprehensive model of school-community-family partnerships undertaken by New York City in 1991. The initiative originally enabled 10 community-based nonprofit agencies to create school-based community centers as safe havens, providing structured and supervised activities for children, youth, and families. By winter 2000, there were 81 Beacons. In 1997, evaluation staff conducted focus groups at 36 Beacons sites for a total of 227 participants. The majority of focus group participants were parents of children attending the Beacon; some were other relatives or adults enrolled in English as a Second Language or basic education classes at the Beacon. The responses of focus group participants indicated that the Beacons have had a positive impact on their lives and those of their children as well as on their neighborhoods. Over and over, participants testified as to the work of the Beacons in providing a safe place for youth, fostering positive youth development, supporting families, and improving parent-child communication, facilitating linkages with schools, and providing opportunities for neighborhood improvement and economic development. (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 446 186

An Oasis in This Desert

Parents Talk About THE NEW YORK CITY BEACONS

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

E Archer
Academy for Educational Development

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

AED
Academy for Educational Development

UD033815

An Oasis in This Desert

Parents Talk About THE NEW YORK CITY BEACONS

by

Nancy Nevarez

Academy for Educational Development, Inc.
New York, New York
2000

INTRODUCTION

Every community should have a Beacon. It betters the quality of life.

The motto that it takes a village to raise a child—well, the Bronx is the proof. The village of the Bronx is coming together here.

The Beacon and I have the same goals: safety, education and reaching out to empower the community.

This report presents the findings of focus groups convened to determine what the parents of youth participants in the New York City Beacons think about the program. The Beacons initiative is an ambitious and comprehensive model of school-community-family partnerships undertaken by New York City in 1991 with municipal Safe Streets, Safe Cities funding. The initiative originally enabled 10 community-based nonprofit agencies in selected New York City neighborhoods to create school-based community centers as "safe havens" providing structured and supervised activities for children, youth, and families. As of winter 2000, there were 81 Beacons, at least one in each community school district (and several in many).

Individual Beacons are managed by community-based organizations and work collaboratively with community school boards, their host schools, community advisory councils, and a broad range of community organizations and institutions. Individual Beacons offer children, youth, and adults a wide variety of recreation, social services, educational enrichment, and vocational activities. Many Beacons also take an active role in the community by sponsoring and organizing activities—voter registration drives, community cleanups, cultural events, and celebrations—to make the community a better place to live.

Evaluation of the New York City Beacons

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York has provided ongoing support and technical assistance to the Beacons since shortly after the initiative's inception to help Beacon staff articulate the vision of the Beacons and make it a reality. YDI is currently sponsoring a three-year evaluation of the Beacons in collaboration with the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development. The major purposes of this evaluation are to provide information that can help improve the initiative as a whole as well as individual Beacons; inform decision-making regarding the initiative; describe and analyze the impact of the Beacons on youth, families, communities, and schools; and inform efforts to implement Beacons in other cities nationwide. The evaluation is being conducted by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), the Hunter College Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community Health, and the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. A major evaluation activity entailed focus groups with Beacon parents, other adult participants, and community members to

determine their views about the Beacon's impact on their lives and that of their children as well as on the surrounding neighborhood. This report presents the findings of these focus groups.

Focus-Group Participants

In fall 1997, evaluation staff conducted focus groups at 36 Beacon sites; these groups involved six to eight parents, for a total of 227 participants. During the focus groups, adult participants were asked what had attracted them to the Beacon, what activities they participated in, whether their children were also participants, and how they thought the Beacon had affected their neighborhood. The overwhelming majority (95%) of focus-group participants lived in the Beacon neighborhood; the few participants from outside the neighborhood came to the Beacon to attend ESL classes or were parents who traveled so that their children could participate in Beacon activities. The majority (89%) of focus-group participants were parents of children attending the Beacon. Some participants identified themselves as grandparents, aunts, or godparents in guardian or custodial roles. Those who were not parents or guardians of participants tended to be adults enrolled in ESL or basic education classes, senior citizens taking art and sewing classes, or community volunteers.

The overwhelming responses from the focus-group participants indicated that the Beacons have had a great positive impact on their lives and those of their children as well as on their neighborhoods. Over and over, focus-group participants testified to the work of the Beacons in providing a safe place for youth, fostering positive youth development, supporting families and improving parent-child communication, facilitating linkages with schools, and providing opportunities for neighborhood improvement and economic development.

The most frequent response from parents to questions about what brought them to the Beacon was, "My children go to the afterschool program." The specific activities parents mentioned their children's taking part in fell into three major categories: sports (basketball, soccer, baseball, martial arts); academic assistance (homework help, tutoring); and performing arts (dance, music, chorus, acting). Less often mentioned were youth leadership activities, visual arts, and computers. Adult focus-group members reported participating in three types of activities at the Beacon: extracurricular (aerobics, family night, sewing, art); education (ESL, computer, GED, literacy classes); and support services (parenting classes, counseling, information and referral, and the Food-Share program).

The rest of this report presents what people said about the Beacons in general, and about the Beacons and schools, families, and neighborhoods.

ABOUT THE BEACONS IN GENERAL

Focus-group participants overwhelmingly described the Beacons as a safe place, as like family, and as a place that fostered multiculturalism and supported positive youth development.

A Safe Place

The most frequent comment from parents and other adults about the Beacon was that it had helped create "a safe place," a "safe haven," a "safety net," a "refuge," and a "violence-free space" for children and youth. Parents and other adults repeatedly said that they "trusted" the Beacons and described the "peace of mind," and the "tranquility" that the program gave them and their children. A major aspect of this sense of safety was that the Beacon provided an "alternative to the streets" and kept youth away from high-risk behaviors, from "hanging out in the streets," "getting in trouble," and "away from gangs" and "negative peer pressure." Three parents summed up this attitude:

> *This isn't the type of neighborhood that kids should be on the streets. Gangs, drugs and violence are everywhere. There are a lot of teens who choose to be at the Beacon rather than on the streets because the Beacon is a safe place.*
>
> *The Beacon means security, kids off the street, recreation; if we didn't have the Beacon the kids would be on the street getting in trouble and arrested.*
>
> *They learn a lot at the Beacon and stay off the streets and out of trouble. I noticed that the children that stay with the Beacon don't go to jail and they're less likely to fall into a bad life.*

Other participants said:

> *Before I would not let my kids out, but I let my kids come to the Beacon. It's a safe place.*
>
> *I trust the Beacon and feel safe with my kids here.*
>
> *The Beacon offers activities. It makes sure kids aren't in the streets and helps them not get lost.*
>
> *The Beacon is a place where kids have something good to do. They are protected from gangs.*

A Sense of Family

For many, the Beacon offers more than just a safe haven. Focus-group participants repeatedly described the Beacon as "family," "an extension of home and family," and as "one big family, all together." They also described the Beacon as creating a better community by providing opportunities for children, youth, and neighborhood residents to get to know one another. They said:

I walk down the street and I see people from the Beacon. They know me and respect me.

Those of us that are here in the Beacon know each other now on the streets. That's a very big change—recognizing one another and our kids.

We all know each other from the Beacon; then in the community we see each other and help each other out.

It's a positive place because it's family-oriented. There's good communication between staff and kids.

Some participants stated that the Beacon's presence had motivated them to challenge the negative behavior of some youth and encourage them to join the Beacon:

One time I saw some kids writing graffiti and called them on it. I helped them wash it and they promised not to do it again. The other day that same group was playing basketball in the gym—they saw the Beacon open and they came in from the streets.

In the community, you can talk more to the kids in the street. You know them from the Beacon.

Celebrating Multiculturalism

Focus-group participants described the opportunities—such as street fairs, cookouts, special events, and committees—that the Beacons provide for community residents to get to know one another and in particular to appreciate the diverse cultures of the community:

This is a diverse community, but it is dense. We live on top of each other. The Beacon allows kids to interact in social and athletic events.

The Beacon is multicultural and they involve everybody. My daughter used to be like, "this Chinese girl" or "this Black girl." Now she says, "this girl."

The Beacon provides more opportunity for my children to socialize with kids from other cultures.

The Beacon does cookouts and special holiday events to help a melting pot of diverse cultures become one community.

Support for Positive Youth Development

Parents also described the many ways that the Beacons supports the healthy development of youth by providing resources and activities—such as dance classes, drama, sports, music lessons, and trips to the country—that they could not otherwise afford for their children. In addition, parents gratefully noted how the exposure to other activities had curtailed their children's dependency on television and provided them with a range of activities that were not possible in crowded homes and urban neighborhoods. Parents said:

We are lucky that with the Beacon our kids can go to a campus upstate. You should have seen our kids playing in the leaves. My children love to star watch, but you can't do that in Brooklyn.

At the Beacon, they have more than we can afford to give them. They can learn music. They can run around and jump—things they can't do in our apartment.

My daughter loves the Beacon. She is in ballet and karate—two things I cannot pay for privately.

My children are learning to play musical instruments—something I couldn't give them.

Participants in the focus groups described how Beacon participation had helped foster personal and social development in their children. They noted that the Beacon had exposed their children to much-needed role models and, in certain instances, helped transform youth who were already involved in at-risk behavior:

I brought in two girls who were cutting class. They started volunteering at the Beacon. They became more responsible. They learned to use the computer and they're not cutting class.

It's good to see older kids helping the younger kids. Kids are feeling useful, not just hanging out.

Coming to the Beacon has brought my daughter out of her shell.

Teens get into gangs because they are looking for support. Here they get that support.

Many parents described how the Beacon had provided opportunities—formal and informal—for their children to be involved in community service and in work at the Beacon that fostered a spirit of altruism. Several parents summarized these views:

At the Beacon, I've had my faith in youth restored. On many occasions, I see them working together and taking care of each other. For our Halloween party this year, the older kids set up a haunted house for the younger ones.

During the huge snowstorm a couple of years ago, when all the schools were closed, the Beacon children came together and helped the older people shovel their snow.

All my kids have been part of the Beacon. My oldest, now 22, works at the Beacon. My other son, 17, was president of Young Hope at the Beacon. My youngest is in the afterschool program. From every stage, we've grown with the Beacon.

At the Beacon, the youth are part of something positive; they're giving back to their communities.

THE BEACON AND SCHOOLS

Focus-group participants described the Beacon as affecting their relationship with the school—making the school building more accessible to parents and fostering their involvement in their children's education. Some parents praised the Beacon's educational staff for their accessibility and willingness to share information with parents. Parents who had participated in Beacon educational workshops indicated that they felt inspired and empowered to communicate with school personnel. Several parents summarized these views:

> *You can talk to Beacon teachers more so than regular teachers. You don't have access to the school.*
>
> *When I come to the Beacon, the teacher tells me everything my son does. I can also talk to the director about anything.*
>
> *The atmosphere in the Beacon is comfortable. At the Beacon, teachers are accessible and attentive.*
>
> *Since I've been coming to the Beacon I can talk to a teacher face to face calmly.*
>
> *The Beacon has helped a lot of parents have more communication with the schools.*

Opportunities for Academic Development

Focus-group participants also described the Beacon as instrumental in helping their children receive much-needed additional academic support, which parents often could not provide. Participants also credited the Beacon with accelerating their children's progress in school, fostering a love of learning, and encouraging demoralized youth to stay in school. This support was especially important to non-English-speaking parents. Once again, parents mentioned that their children were watching less television because of the Beacon's influence. Many parents summarized these views:

> *Before my daughter joined the Beacon, it was difficult for me to help her with her homework—she didn't want to do it and I didn't know how to help her. Now it's a habit for her to do her homework.*
>
> *The Beacon makes learning fun and exciting: they've already gone through so many books in the literacy program. My son is now getting 100s and reading on his own, even reading to me.*
>
> *My son used to be very discouraged with school. At the Beacon, he gets a lot of encouragement and support. He's more involved in school now.*
>
> *My son would be behind in his schoolwork without the Beacon. He spends less time watching TV and more time in the Beacon.*
>
> *The Beacon has done a lot for keeping youth in school. It gives them something to strive for.*
>
> *The Beacon has helped kids stay in school by showing them there are opportunities out there.*

THE BEACON AND FAMILIES

Participants described several ways that the Beacons supported families: by offering resources and referrals; by running support groups, workshops, and intergenerational events; and by providing afterschool child care, as well as literacy and computer classes.

The Beacon as a Resource

Participants described the Beacon as a resource—a place in the community that families, children, and youth could go for information and help:

> *I attend the workshops. I have taken part in the AIDS and housing workshops and the Food-Share program. People at the Beacon will help you with anything.*
>
> *The Beacon is good for obtaining help and referrals. I take advantage of the all the info they provide.*
>
> *My kids know if I am not available, they can go to the Beacon counselor.*
>
> *I come to the Beacon for health-care information, to network with other parents and get encouragement. I get encouragement and any other help I need.*

Parent Support Activities

Parents gave eloquent examples of how their communication and relationships with their children had improved after their participation in the Beacon's parent support groups. Others spoke about how the Beacon helped reduce the stress of raising children in poor urban communities.

> *The Beacon talks about real difficult issues and they teach us all—the kids and the parents—how to communicate.*
>
> *My son and I were always arguing. At the Beacon they taught me to listen to him, listen to his feelings. I listen to him now, I let him explain.*
>
> *I'm a young mother and there's just so many things I've learned about mothering since I've been coming to the Beacon.*
>
> *I've gotten to know my kids better. They confide in me more.*
>
> *At the Beacon it's parents giving guidance to other parents on how to handle their teenagers.*

Intergenerational Activities

Focus-group participants described various types of intergenerational activities and events that helped them make a stronger connection with their children and youth. Participants noted that the Beacon provided ways for children and youth to interact with older members of their community and described these experiences as positive for both ends of the age spectrum:

> *My daughter was part of a dance group. I helped them buy the music and sew the costumes. It was an opportunity to cooperate and share something that was very important to her.*
>
> *Before, me and the children were always watching TV. Now we are doing activities together like a family.*
>
> *The Beacon provides a forum where seniors and youth can interact. I helped a 10-year-old girl sew three dresses. It was wonderful. It's helping to raise the level of respect for seniors in this community.*
>
> *I went on a Beacon trip with my teen and his friends. He saw how much I volunteered that day and he felt really nurtured. It was a great experience for both of us.*
>
> *The Beacon helps with adult-kid relationships. Kids learn how to work with adults in a fun way and to respect them.*

Helping Parents Work

Throughout the focus groups, parents described how the Beacon supported families. Most frequently mentioned was the free afterschool child care that allowed them to work or continue their education or employment training. Participants also spoke of the peace of mind of knowing that their children were not home alone, were receiving help with schoolwork, and were involved in safe activities after school. Lastly, participants spoke of the benefits to the community of having more people employed. In short, participants agreed that the "Beacon was great for working parents," especially for working mothers. Several parents summarized these views:

> *I don't have to pay for day care. The kids used to play in the streets; now they learn and play inside.*
>
> *The Beacon is the best thing that's happened to this community. People would have to stop working if it closed.*
>
> *The Beacon is good for everyone in the community, especially since we have a lot of single working moms who need to know they have a safe place for their kids.*
>
> *I work all day. When my child comes home, his homework is done and he has done extra activities.*
>
> *The Beacon is critical for working parents. If the Beacon closes, I'll stop working.*

I take care of two grandchildren and I work. I know they are safe at the Beacon—not alone at home.

If it wasn't for the Beacon, I wouldn't be able to work—it's a choice between working or not.

Educational Opportunities at the Beacon

Participants also mentioned the educational opportunities such as ESL, literacy, GED, and computer classes for community members and adults, through which the Beacon further strengthens families and fosters the economic development of the community. Several participants described their involvement in the Beacon's education programs as having led to employment; others described the good feeling of knowing that they were involved in learning along with their children:

In the summertime when the Beacon offered computer classes, every class was full.

On evenings and Sundays, the Beacon is packed with adults going for their GED.

Many immigrants in this neighborhood take advantage of the ESL classes.

I attend the computer class and the ESL class. I've been hired as a teacher and a counselor.

Before the Beacon, we were home all the time. At the Beacon, my children are doing all kinds of activities and I have a job at the Beacon—assisting with programming.

THE BEACONS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Parents, adult participants, and other community members described the Beacon as playing a pivotal role in fostering neighborhood improvement projects and mobilizing the community and its resources for such events as park cleanups, mural paintings, planting gardens, and graffiti paint-outs. Most important, focus-group participants reported that Beacon neighborhood improvement efforts had contributed to curtailing negative activities, such as crime and drugs in their communities, further bolstering the Beacon's reputation as a safe haven. Participants also testified to the importance of the Beacon's convenience and credited the Beacons with making their neighborhoods safer and more attractive, as well as with fostering a sense of optimism and pride in the community. Some parents said:

> *I haven't seen another program like this. It's right here, with Hispanics and African-Americans running it, and we don't have to travel downtown for it.*
>
> *The Beacon gives you somewhere to go in your own neighborhood. You don't have to travel; you don't need carfare.*
>
> *A lot of people are either on the street or watching television at home. But they come into the Beacon and they get a lot of help. There's more hope—for a better, more positive future.*
>
> *Years ago there were a lot of street problems. Now we're more involved in cleaning up and improving and we feel safer.*
>
> *I was thinking about moving, but I decided to stay, and the Beacon is part of the reason I stayed. My kids love it and it's improved the whole community.*
>
> *People used to hang in the park near the school, smoking weed. We used to have to go and sweep the court of glass every day to play football. Nothing like that happens anymore.*

In summary, focus-group discussions with over 225 parents, adult participants and other community members revealed that the Beacons have had a great positive impact on the lives of the adults, families, and children who participate in the Beacon, as well as on their communities. Communities are being strengthened, schools are open for the community, and families are being supported while the children and youth are progressing personally and academically because the Beacon is, as one parent described it, "the guiding light."

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is a nonprofit educational evaluation and technical assistance organization committed to addressing human development and educational needs in the United States and throughout the world. AED's School and Community Services department has a strong commitment to excellence and equity in education and to developing links between schools, families, and community-based organizations to increase educational and employment opportunities for youth across the United States. We work with schools, school systems, families, and community-based organizations on comprehensive school and community improvement initiatives, as well as programs addressing specific issues, such as HIV/AIDS education, educational reform, family involvement in education, school-to-work transition, gender equity, and adolescent pregnancy prevention. We design, implement, and evaluate model educational programs; provide technical assistance to schools and school districts; and disseminate information on issues relevant to youth through conferences, seminars, and publications. School and Community Services' main office is located in New York City.

AED Board of Directors

Sol M. Linowitz, *Honorary Chairman of the Board*
Cassandra A. Pyle, *Chairman of the Board*
John Diebold, *Chairman of the Executive Committee and Vice Chairman of the Board*
Joseph S. Iseman, *Secretary of the Corporation*
Stephen F. Moseley, *President and Chief Executive Officer*

Robert O. Anderson
Barbara B. Blum
Roberta N. Clarke
Alonzo A. Crim
Harriet Mayor Fulbright
Ivan L. Head
Frederick S. Humphries
Walter F. Leavell
F. David Mathews
Sheila Avrin McLean
Edward W. Russell
Paul Simon
Alfred Sommer
Niara Sudarkasa
Alexander B. Trowbridge

Emeritus Members of the Board

Marie Davis Gadsden
Joseph E. Slater
Willard Wirtz

Academy for Educational Development
New York, New York

AED

AED

Academy for Educational Development

Principal Offices:

1825 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20009-5721
Tel: (202) 884-8000
Fax: (202) 884-8400
Internet: ADMINDC@AED.ORG

100 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10011
Tel: (212) 243-1110
Fax: (212) 627-0407
Internet: ADMINNY@AED.ORG

www.aed.org